

§ 150B-40. Conduct of hearing; presiding officer; ex parte communication.

(a) Hearings shall be conducted in a fair and impartial manner. At the hearing, the agency and the parties shall be given an opportunity to present evidence on issues of fact, examine and cross-examine witnesses, including the author of a document prepared by, on behalf of or for the use of the agency and offered into evidence, submit rebuttal evidence, and present arguments on issues of law or policy.

If a party fails to appear in a contested case after he has been given proper notice, the agency may continue the hearing or proceed with the hearing and make its decision in the absence of the party.

(b) Except as provided under subsection (e) of this section, hearings under this Article shall be conducted by a majority of the agency. An agency shall designate one or more of its members to preside at the hearing. If a party files in good faith a timely and sufficient affidavit of the personal bias or other reason for disqualification of any member of the agency, the agency shall determine the matter as a part of the record in the case, and its determination shall be subject to judicial review at the conclusion of the proceeding. If a presiding officer is disqualified or it is impracticable for him to continue the hearing, another presiding officer shall be assigned to continue with the case, except that if assignment of a new presiding officer will cause substantial prejudice to any party, a new hearing shall be held or the case dismissed without prejudice.

(c) The presiding officer may:

- (1) Administer oaths and affirmations;
- (2) Sign and issue subpoenas in the name of the agency, requiring attendance and giving of testimony by witnesses and the production of books, papers, and other documentary evidence;
- (3) Provide for the taking of testimony by deposition;
- (4) Regulate the course of the hearings, set the time and place for continued hearings, and fix the time for filing of briefs and other documents;
- (5) Direct the parties to appear and confer to consider simplification of the issues by consent of the parties; and
- (6) Apply to any judge of the superior court resident in the district or presiding at a term of court in the county where a hearing is pending for an order to show cause why any person should not be held in contempt of the agency and its processes, and the court shall have the power to impose punishment as for contempt for acts which would constitute direct or indirect contempt if the acts occurred in an action pending in superior court.

(d) Unless required for disposition of an ex parte matter authorized by law, a member of an agency assigned to make a decision or to make findings of fact and conclusions of law in a contested case under this Article shall not communicate, directly or indirectly, in connection with any issue of fact or question of law, with any person or party or his representative, except on notice and opportunity for all parties to participate. This prohibition begins at the time of the notice of hearing. An agency member may communicate with other members of the agency and may have the aid and advice of the agency staff other than the staff which has been or is engaged in investigating or prosecuting functions in connection with the case under consideration or a factually-related case. This section does not apply to an agency employee or party representative with professional training in accounting, actuarial science, economics or financial analysis insofar as the case involves financial practices or conditions.

(e) When a majority of an agency is unable or elects not to hear a contested case, the agency shall apply to the Director of the Office of Administrative Hearings for the designation of an administrative law judge to preside at the hearing of a contested case under this Article.

Upon receipt of the application, the Director shall, without undue delay, assign an administrative law judge to hear the case.

The provisions of this Article, rather than the provisions of Article 3, shall govern a contested case in which the agency requests an administrative law judge from the Office of Administrative Hearings.

The administrative law judge assigned to hear a contested case under this Article shall sit in place of the agency and shall have the authority of the presiding officer in a contested case under this Article. The administrative law judge shall make a proposal for decision, which shall contain proposed findings of fact and proposed conclusions of law.

An administrative law judge shall stay any contested case under this Article on motion of an agency which is a party to the contested case, if the agency shows by supporting affidavits that it is engaged in other litigation or administrative proceedings, by whatever name called, with or before a federal agency, and this other litigation or administrative proceedings will determine the position, in whole or in part, of the agency in the contested case. At the conclusion of the other litigation or administrative proceedings, the contested case shall proceed and be determined as expeditiously as possible.

The agency may make its final decision only after the administrative law judge's proposal for decision is served on the parties, and an opportunity is given to each party to file exceptions and proposed findings of fact and to present oral and written arguments to the agency. (1985, c. 746, s. 1; 1985 (Reg. Sess., 1986), c. 1022, ss. 1(1), 6(3), 6(4).)